

Do women disclosing domestic abuse experience further discrimination?

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Female workers who come forward about an abusive partner can see their career prospects impacted for years to follow, explains Alison Bailey

As HR professionals, we may have experience in developing policy and supporting employees who make domestic abuse disclosures, and we may have seen the damage that domestic abuse from an intimate partner has on women's employment and future within the organisation.

The evidence is out there – throughout the last decade there have been many international reports and surveys into the impact of domestic abuse on employment, and they all report the same thing: domestic abuse from an intimate partner does have a negative effect on a woman's employment and can lead to job loss. One can only begin to imagine the economic challenges that come with that eventuality. When we think of women who have experienced domestic abuse, who do we think about? Do we think about career women? As the government highlights in its draft 2020 domestic abuse bill, domestic abuse can happen to anyone, "regardless of age, race, class, social background, gender, disability, religion, sexuality or ethnicity", but the reports and discussions around domestic abuse and its impact on employment to date fails to research the impact domestic abuse has upon careers.

Is domestic abuse really a problem for career women and to what extent? A report investigating the impact of domestic abuse from an intimate partner on employees within Vodafone's nine international markets, produced by KPMG in 2019, estimates that approximately 30 million women (employees) have experienced domestic abuse from an intimate partner in the last 12 months, and that approximately 4.4 million women have had their careers interrupted, at a global cost of £10.5m per annum.

Yes, the evidence is clear, but precisely how and why are women's careers impacted? What are the employers' perceptions of women who disclose domestic abuse? Why does the employer's perception change upon a disclosure? Effective policies are required to protect women's employment from the negative impact of domestic abuse, but also policies to protect women's careers.

On 25 July 2018, New Zealand passed a bill, which came into effect on 1 April 2019, giving all employees who disclose domestic abuse up to 10 days' paid leave in addition to statutory holidays and sick pay entitlement. However, unlike similar legislation passed by the Philippines in 2004, which also provides 10 days' paid leave, and the provinces of Manitoba and Ontario in Canada, which gives five days' paid leave, New Zealand's progressive legislation went further, by allowing women experiencing domestic abuse to request flexible working arrangements and, importantly, making discrimination against women disclosing domestic abuse illegal. New Zealand recognises the importance of protecting employment, with employers facing a penalty of up to \$20,000 if they discriminate against employees upon a

disclosure. But this progressive legislation does not specifically focus on women's careers. To date, there is no legislation in place to protect the employment rights of those experiencing domestic abuse in the UK and no legislation to protect women's careers.

Like it or not, there is considerable evidence that supports claims that domestic abuse negatively affects employment but, while historic employment surveys ask a single question about whether domestic abuse damages a woman's career prospects or not, they do not investigate this point any further and have not yet determined the level of support employers offer career women. In addition, historic employment surveys have not researched the broader effects a domestic abuse disclosure can have upon a woman's career and their subsequent economic independence, and future.

However, a study at Sussex University is doing just that. The study is investigating the impact a domestic abuse disclosure has upon women's careers and whether organisational domestic abuse policies and measures adequately protect career women or whether fear around the employer's perception of domestic abuse is the reason career women may choose to stay silent.

An anticipated outcome of the study will be to identify gaps in domestic abuse policies offered by organisations so more comprehensive and inclusive measures may be developed in the future to ensure women's careers are protected and they do not experience further victimisation. Another important aspect the study will investigate is the broader challenges career women may experience from within society as a result of domestic abuse – for example, access to legal services, the courts, social services and support agencies – and whether being seen as a career woman benefits or even disadvantages them.

Sussex University is looking for women at all stages in their career who have experienced domestic abuse to take part in the study. If you would like to take part in this important research, please visit the [University of Sussex website](#).

The survey takes approximately 25 minutes to complete. If you would like to participate in a one-to-one interview after completing the survey, please email alison.bailey@sussex.ac.uk

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